

## The Curse of Silver

Every moon was getting worse and worse. Illana had survived so far and Dova considered it his burden to bear, but he couldn't bring himself to end it.

"There have been four attacks in your region," Master Romage glowered. He was an older man with a shaved head and firm muscles from a lifetime of service. "You've been remiss in your duties."

"I'm not the only hunter to let a few attacks happen in their region," Dova said.

"You currently have the most of any region," Master Romage snapped. "Don't pretend that you don't know what I'm talking about. Your attention is divided. Resolve the current problem or you'll be relieved of your post."

"No law has been broken yet," Dova said. "She hasn't hurt anyone."

"Just because she isn't hurting anyone directly doesn't absolve her of the attacks!" Master Romage yelled. "Your sympathy for her is going to get someone killed. You have to decide what matters more: her life or the lives of everyone else in your region?"

"No one else has been turned yet..."

"Don't gamble with someone else's humanity," Master Romage shook his head. "She's too far gone. She was bitten. I'm sorry, Dova."

"She's been contained."

"You can't tame it!" Master Romage snarled. "I am giving you the comfort of putting her out of her misery. If you don't, I'll find someone else to."

It was as close to a farewell as Dova was going to get. Among the guild, Master Romage was known for his ruthlessness and pure hatred of the monsters he named their enemy. There were rumors he killed his mother after she turned and Dova wasn't in a position to doubt that as truth. It would take a man of that cruelty to ask what he demanded of Dova.

Dova looked outside. The moon was half-full tonight, but Illana refused to leave the cell she now considered home, even when the sky was completely dark. She would be in a better mood tonight than if he waited. There was no convincing Romage. Maybe he could still salvage the humanity in Illana.

She didn't look human, even if it was her current form. Illana was curled in the corner of her

cell, exhausted after days of not sleeping. She wrapped a blanket around herself for modesty, but she looked feverish and sweating. Her dark, midnight-colored hair hung around her face in loose waves, obscuring her now golden eyes from the sunlight that filled the room. The plate from breakfast had been untouched, but Dova knew it would be eaten in a matter of hours when she was hungry enough. "Feast or Famine is the battle of the beast," a master slayer had told him once. "And the beast will always win."

Dova set the fresh plate of bread, meat, and an apple on the floor of the cell, but Illana didn't even look towards him. She didn't need to see to know he was there.

"Why won't you kill me?" Illana asked, her voice rough and hoarse after months of screaming agony.

"I only kill monsters."

"You swore!" Illana snarled, snapping her head towards him. Her gold eyes burned like embers. "You swore an oath! Anyone bitten by the beast must be treated as the beast. That was the code you lived by, that your brothers died by! And you can't even do me the courtesy of killing me when I've begged you to."

"Would kill me if our roles were reversed?" Dova asked. "It's easy to pretend that you would do the right thing until the knife is in your hand."

"I would if it was my duty!" Illana said. "What makes my life--corrupted as it is--worth more than the life of anyone else you killed?"

"So now you're mad at me for doing my job?" Dova asked. "Which is Illana, do you want me to kill werewolves or show them mercy?"

"I want you to be consistent!" Illana yelled. "Last year, you prided yourself on your kills and wore their claws like a badge of honor. Now, you can't even bring yourself to kill a werewolf at its weakest."

"We...we can learn to control it. It's easy to time, but we--"

"I don't sleep," Illana breathed, slumping onto the floor, "unless you drug me. I don't eat until the beast forces her way to the surface and devours everything. How long until your hand is too close? You're prolonging the inevitable."

"You want me to kill you? It's selfish to ask for. You will be gone and no longer suffering, but

what about me, Illana? How can I be expected to live without you?"

"Coward," Illana sneered, retreating to her corner of the cell again. "I was bitten. By the words of your oath, you should have killed me months ago. You've killed others without problems: other women and even a young boy. But your emotions about me cloud your judgment. It makes you weak and will get you killed."

"I'm more worried about you getting--"

"Do you think these bars will hold a werewolf forever?" Illana asked. "How long until the monster is freed? You know werewolves better than anyone. Do you think I'll be able to stop the wolf when it breaks free and goes after you?"

"You would."

"I'm losing more time each moon..." Illana said. "You're losing time to end it...for both of us."

"I'm being forced to make the impossible choice: your life or my soul. Do you think I can keep doing this?"

"Do you think I can?" Illana laughed, bitterly. "If I don't die by your hand or the hand of another hunter, this disease will make me lose myself."

"How do you know about--?"

"I heard Master Romage speak. His voice is too deep and rumbles like an empty stomach. I hear the creak of his leather armor and the smell of horse manure and wolf blood. He is going to send someone to kill me if you can't. Do you think they would offer such kindness that you could?"

"We've never tried taming a werewolf. It could work."

"This isn't a border collie retired from the fields, Dova. This is me. You can't tame this monster in me. I'm too far gone to save."

Dova shook his head and turned away. "I'll be in the kitchen. If you feel up to it, maybe we can have lunch together..."

"Coward," Illana repeated before turning away. Dova turned away, leaving the cell door open behind him. She'd called him far worse than that.

Dova didn't have much of an appetite himself. Between taking care of Illana and the surprise visit from Master Romage, he was too exhausted to think about eating. He didn't sleep when

Illana turned, keeping his crossbow trained on her as the monstrous wolf prowled circles around the cage. Not silver arrows, of course, but arrows with a powerful sedative. On the rare instances that he need someone brought back alive, the sleeping agent was powerful enough to take the stride out of a wolf without killing it. Illana did sleep when she was a wolf, less fitful and deeper than when she was a human. All the other nights of the month didn't balance out her fear and agony of the night to come. Master Romage said that the wolf was always present, just beneath the surface. Monsters rarely slept.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Dova tended his crossbow bolts, making sure the metal points were securely fixed. The weapon hadn't been used as more than a deterrent for over four months now. He used to spend weeks at a time in the woods, but now he didn't even go out when the moon was full in the sky. He couldn't deny he'd been dismissing his responsibilities. But Illana needed him more, even if she wouldn't admit it.

The wolf was getting less aggressive each time his beloved turned into the monster. Dova knew the werewolf could be tamed. Most likely. It had been decades since a werewolf had been left to live, usually killed after the first moon to ensure the eradication of the disease once and for all. No carriers meant it couldn't be passed. There were old tales of werewolves and humans coexisting together, but it felt like a cruel mockery of hope rather than an actual truth. When Illana was bitten, however, that hope festered into a dream until it became a desire.

Master Romage had told him to execute Illana the day he proposed the idea. The rest of the Slayer's Guild thought in absolutes and only wanted to do as their oath commanded: rid the world of monsters and wolves. Dova wondered if they were worthy to judge what was a monster anymore. They had asked him to kill his wife. What could be so monstrous by comparison?

Illana had been visiting a friend's house, laden with baked goods and fine wine. She went to stay with friends often while Dova was out hunting on a full moon, the sounds of the creaking house and blustering weather too unnerving to face alone. An evening with a friend once a month was a small price to pay for marrying a werewolf hunter. It came with respect, clout, and influence. Slayers were always given the finest accommodations in the village for the risks they took, the fear they inspired, and the grim duties they fulfilled.

Had he been ten steps quicker, he might have spared her this fate. Ten steps slower and he

would have lost her there on the path and his quest would be one fueled by loss and vengeance. The possible “Could Have Beens” kept Dova awake all night when he wasn’t watching Illana. He was only left with what had happened and that hurt worse than any wound he’d earned on his journey to becoming a master slayer. She’d asked him to kill her that very night, but he refused. He spent the first night she turned with her, hoping that he would find less difficulty in killing the wolf than Illana. Her transformation had been agonizing, but when she was finally a wolf, he still saw too much of his love in her eyes. He hated that more than anything. He was determined that if he still saw glimpses of Illana in the wolf’s eyes, there was a chance he could still reach her.

Setting his crossbow bolts aside, Dova leaned his head back and closed his eyes. The warmth of the fire in the hearth cut through his aching heart and made him feel somewhat better. He had eaten earlier, but only to stop his growling stomach. Illana had just turned a few days ago and the sun was up. She’d wake him if she needed anything.

Dova woke at the kitchen table, sore and aching. He fought back the urge to shiver and looked towards the door. The latch was undone and he could see straight out into the moon-bathed yard. The door to Illana's room was also open. Rushing, Dova looked at the empty cage, the food untouched and the barred door wide open. The blanket was folded neatly with a paper note on top of it.

My love,

I knew you would never do what I asked of you. Perhaps it is cruel to ask you to do such a thing, but it is also a necessary thing. I'm going to go. You can't protect me and the people of this village. It breaks my heart to see you try. I lose a bit more of myself each time I turn and you are courting with the beast more and more. I don't know how much longer I can call myself by my name. However, I can't end my own life either. So I'm leaving it up to chance, to fate, to the winds. I'm going far from here, to a region of one of your brotherhoods. Perhaps I will be able to conquer this disease and come back to you as you hope. But I can't keep living in fear that I'll hurt someone if I stay in town, especially you. And, if I can't control it, perhaps some other hunter will have luck killing me. Go on living. Protect the people of the town and do as you swore.

Do not look for me in the eyes of the monsters you hunt. If a wolf is attacking, it is not me, but it is a monster. Or perhaps we're becoming one and the same. Maybe I'm not lost, just changed. Like my physical body, my mind is changing with each moon. There's a chance something new will emerge, but first I must be destroyed.

Perhaps, if you are right and it can be controlled, our paths will cross again one day. I hope you treat who I become as kindly as you treated me.

Always your darling,

Illana

Dova set the letter down and sat in the cell of iron bars. All he could do was hope that fate was kind to his love. In the end, it was all he could ever do.